

CHAPTER VII.

THE MINISTER.

“He prayeth best that loveth best.”

WHEN her late Majesty ascended the Throne, the Rev. Alexander Wilson was minister of the Parish of Aberlour, having held the living for a number of years, and was at the time an old man. The Presbytery had pressed him for some time to get an assistant. His reply was—“The hirelin’s nae like the auld shepherd.” On the first Sunday after the Queen’s coronation he prayed for the defunct King (George IV.). On being told that he prayed for the dead monarch, he remarked—“Weel, weel, he’ll nae be better nor waur for onything I said aboot him.” On the next Sunday he remembered the Queen, but forgot her name. After a long pause, he prayed—“May the Lord bless and protect her young Majesty, the Queen—the Queen—extraordinary!”

After that incident the minister of Aberlour never ascended the pulpit stairs again. The Presbytery met, and wisely recommended him to accept the services of the Rev. Cosmo Macpherson, who ministered to the people of Aberlour until Mr. Wilson’s death. Mr. Wilson was in many respects a typical parish minister of the old school that were fast dying out when our late beloved Queen began to reign. They were generally men of much learning, and many of them sons of humble parents, and they easily adapted themselves to their surroundings and the homely speech of their people. Some of them, like the minister of Aberlour, had a strain of dry humour and sarcasm that came out during intercourse with their parishioners.

Some little time before Mr. Wilson’s prayer for the Queen, in the absence of Mr. Asher, the minister of Inveraven, he was elected to fill his pulpit, and on a Sabbath morning, with the help of Annie Dye (his housekeeper), the minister mounted his gig at

the Manse door on his way to preach in the Church of Inveraven. He had only got a short distance from the door when he discovered that he had forgotten his sermon. He stopped the gig and told Willie Stuart (his man servant) to run back and tell Annie to give him the sermon, which she would find on the muckle table. Willie returned and handed it to the minister, who, on looking at it, said, "Bide a wee, Willie, Annie has sent the wrang sermon; this'll never dae. I have hanged Haman twice in the kirk o' Invera'an, and the fowk'll nae ha'e forgotten the last time I preached this sermon. There, tell Annie tae look for 'The Selling of Joseph.'"

During his long ministry, it is impossible to say how many times he had preached his two famous sermons—the hanging of Haman and the selling of Joseph by his brethern to the Midianitish merchants. Every word of the last discourse was as familiar to his hearers as the 23rd Psalm. He laid great stress on the remarkably low price that they sold him for, and how little, when divided into ten parts, each of them would receive, winding up the discourse with—"My friends, it is very evident that Joseph's ten brethren were prepared to part with him at any price; the mere trifle that they received for him is a proof of this."

It is interesting to contrast the material, the social, and the religious privileges that the people of Aberlour enjoy at the present day with the condition of the parish when Mr. Wilson first prayed for our late beloved Sovereign. On my last visit to that much-favoured parish, I looked at the people leaving the churches. As I did so, I was able in some measure to realise the astonishment of poor Rip Van Winkle when he awoke from his long sleep bewildered at the changes that he beheld. As I looked at the men and women as they filled past, I asked myself if they were the descendants of the men and women that listened to the ministry of Mr. Wilson when he made his memorable prayer for our late beloved Sovereign at the commencement of her reign. At that time men went to church clad mostly in home-spun, and many of them wore, like the minister, knee-breeches. The luxury of a calico shirt was beyond the means of many, and they were well content to don one of harden. Women generally wore gowns of linsey-woolsey, and I know that they became them well, for there

is no material made for female wear that is both so warm and wearable. The elder women mostly went "to the kirk" in a long grey freize cloak, with a hood attached, to cover their well-starched mutch should it rain. When her late Majesty ascended the Throne I don't believe there were more than half-a-dozen ginghams in the parish. I never look at the beautiful platinotype of Sir Walter Scott's mother but it reminds me of the many staid, solemn, and expressive faces of the women who sat in the Church of Aberlour wearing the mutch on their heads—a picture that impressed itself upon the mind never to be erased. Although the service was often long, cheerless, and listened to with benumbed and frozen feet, the solemn gravity of the worshippers' faces never changed. The men broke the monotony by frequent resorts to the snuffmull, which was handed from pew to pew during the delivery of the sermon.

During the early decades of the last century the spiritual needs of many parishes in the North of Scotland were scantily supplied. In the Church of Aberlour the communion was administered once a year. The parish was divided into four daughs, namely, Carron, Edinville, Allachie, and Aberlour. The communicants in each separate division came on the appointed day to be catechised by the minister in the church and to receive their tokens.

Many stories were current in the parish about the quaint way that Mr. Wilson discharged this function. Any of his flock who displayed knowledge of the Scriptures above their fellows were sure to come under his sarcasm. An aunt of my father's, gifted with a glib and fluent tongue, he dubbed "Witty Eppy." "Wise Willie" was the *sobriquet* that he bestowed on a well-known village character, who lived by himself in a room below the Masonic Hall. Other apartments of the building were occupied by old women. Willie and they were at war constantly. To reach his room he had to pass the door of one of them who was a cripple. The other women used to meet in her room, and as Willie passed the door they often set upon him and belaboured him with the old woman's crutches. No woman was ever admitted into what they called "his stiukin' den." They naturally resented being ignored, and declared that they had "neither peace nor saught wi' him an' his swine; that he got up

at fower in the mornin' tae feed them, an' keepit a pot bilin' a nicht fu' o' rotten taties." The angered spinsters averred they "nicht as weel bide in a swinehoose."

When the noise of battle was heard in the passage that led to Willie's den, the news flew quickly by wireless telegraphy to both ends of the village, and every loon in it went to the relief of the old women. Although Willie had only one eye, he was a host in himself not to be confronted. So we made a rear attack upon Willie's pigstye, set his grunTERS flying in all directions, and made our retreat in safety. The matter always ended in both parties "tellin' the minister."

Willie always stated his case in words more forcible than charitable.

"Ever since the world began, a woman was willin' tae dae the deevil's wark, an' they continued at it."

"Ay, ay, Willie," answered the minister; "a wiser man than you has said, 'It is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a contentious and an angry woman,' but wi' a' due deference to Solomon, I tell ye, Willie, they are a very necessary evil. Ye dinna tak' the right way wi' them, Willie, wi' a' your wisdom."

"I hope you are not in the blankets," answered Willie, "but sitting cosily in your great arm chair."

I never see a shock-headed laddie with hands stuck in the pennyless pockets of his short-legged breeks pressing his nose against the plate-glass of a fruiterer's window, feasting his hungry eyes on its tempting contents, but my memory reverts to the old Manse garden, and the time when I used to lean on the dyke that divided it from the kirkyard. There I feasted my eyes on the fruit-laden trees within, their branches bent down with their load of red and golden-coloured apples. The forbidden fruit was very tempting. Some of them did occasionally fall to the ground when they were not blown down by the wind.

Once a year we schoolboys were enabled to sample the minister's gooseberries. When we saw him enter the schoolroom at the unusual hour of half-past nine, and greet the assembled scholars with the usual salutation of "Peace be here," we knew that our services were needed that day to stack his hay. All the bigger boys were released for the day and ordered off at once to the minister's stackyard.

I wonder if there are any of the old boys now alive who, sixty five years ago, "tramped" on the minister's "hay soo" with the writer, and who remember Annie Dye, with her portly figure and rosy face, attended by her two lassies, each carrying a basketful of gooseberries? Apple trees and gooseberry bushes were at that time few and far between in Aberlour.

When the "soo" was finished we filed past the housekeeper, blue bonnet in hand, into which Annie poured a gowpenful of ripe grozets. I have tasted a good many samples of gooseberries since she filled my bonnet, but none had the taste and flavour of the berries that grew in the old Manse garden.

Amongst the church members from the daugh of Carron, Willie Watson, the wizard, never failed to put in an appearance. He was a special object of the minister's sarcasm, owing to the curt and pointed way he answered his questions.

On one occasion he thought he would give Willie a poser by asking him if the Almighty could be the author of evil.

Willie's reply was—"Na, na, he made a' things verra good."

"Then," replied the minister, "Willie, my frien', who created the enemy of mankind, the devil?"

"Hae ye nae deeper question tae speir than that? Ye surely ken that God made him an angel o' licht, an' he made a deevil o' himsel'. Gweed day; I'll be gaun up the brae, if ye hae nae better questions tae speir at me."

Witty Eppie generally went one better than the wizard by turning the tables on the minister and asking him questions. She was great on grace and faith, and she did not scruple to openly declare that the minister was sadly wanting in both. As she was present at nearly every wedding and christening that took place in the parish, she never failed on such occasions to heckle the minister to her heart's content.